

Rich in Grace: *Memoir of a Newark Bibliophile*

It would be around springtime – with humankind drooping from spring fever and allergies, anticipating June and the closing of the school term -- that my mother would ask me what I wanted to do for the summer months. Her question was ½ futile, because summer school was a given in our house. My sister and I were good students -- if you excluded my personal relationship with mathematics -- but my mother felt that whenever the school door opened, her children would be there. So, *after* my two weeks of summer school at Broadway Elementary, what would I like to do? Would I like to go to summer camp? Or, would I like to go to Grandma Janie's house in North Carolina? Grandma's house was always on my schedule. In addition to that "down south" experience, Newark Public Library (NPL) was part of my summer vacation. I went to the library every week, and one spring day was told about a book club for youth that would be held during the summer months. You could read as many books as you wanted, and then discuss it. To a budding bibliophile, this was tantamount to being locked overnight in a bakery with four-layer cakes drenched in coconut and strawberries. My sister and I always opted for North Carolina instead of camp, but I also put in my personal request for the book club at the North End Branch of NPL on Summer Avenue in Newark. It became my special place for several summers, and helped form and fashion the person I am today.

My sister and I were raised with music and dance classes. We lived in a public housing project that overlooked the murky Passaic River: a water-front property. Years later, I discovered from reading *The New York Times* that people of our station were called "poor." However, our piano teacher, Mrs. Clarkson from Halsted Street in East Orange where our father took us every Saturday morning for lessons, told me "we may be poor, but we are rich in grace."

It was grace that I took with me those 1950s summers, to the library up the hill from my housing project home. My attendance there was significant because I was the only child from my neighborhood. I was the only child of color.

The librarian on Summer Avenue was Mrs. Moore, and she was a black woman. That was empowering to me. Her being in a leadership position, however, was not completely alien to me because of the way I was raised in church, St. James AME. My Sunday school had its own library, with books you could actually borrow. But my church was in a black world, in my comfort zone. The North End library was not.

Mrs. Moore conducted the summer book club for all the youth in my neighborhood, and that included me. Yet, I always felt special. The way she smiled at me warmed me to my toes. I knew this was the place for me to be. When she read stories to us, she spoke to me, I was sure of it. I was captivated because characters came alive. When I gave my book report to the group, I could see that she expected the best of me, so the best is what I gave. She sat up straight. I sat up straight. I did not know what "role model" meant, but she was it.

This was my first real library experience, totally different from the experience of Rev. Moses William Howard, Jr., a voracious reader and pastor of the church I now attend, Bethany Baptist. As he has told the story to the congregation many times, he still has physical scars from the savage beating he received from a group of white

boys when he tried to obtain a library card from his library in Americus, Georgia. I was not beaten as I walked up the hill to Summer Avenue. I was in a public library with a black librarian, and I knew, as only a little colored child could know, that she loved me. I knew she would go home at night and talk about her day and her reading group of little kids and that she would mention me, that little colored girl from the projects who loved books, and she would be proud of me and hope that I would continue with my reading and not get caught up in the streets. Such are dreams of teachers, especially black teachers of black children who live in borderline neighborhoods, such as mine.

Mrs. Moore and all of her children stretched out on the super-green lawn of the library. There was a bit of a slope, I remember, and the aroma was simply heavenly. There is nothing on earth quite like the smell of freshly cut grass. Here I read *Beezus and Ramona* by Beverly Cleary, a book I would eventually purchase and read to my own daughter 20 years later, along with Nancy Drew mysteries. The Cleary and Drew books, with other titles, were saved in the basement of the South Ward house on Chadwick Avenue that my father purchased when we moved away from the projects. My sister and I saved our own books for our children and for our grandchildren, and they are being used as we speak. *Grace*.

Reading at NPL on Summer Avenue was one of the highlights of my life. To me, reading *was* life, my natural high. I was encouraged by my family members. They visited NPL and borrowed books on a consistent basis, and my mother also joined Book-of-the-Month Club at a time when they offered no books by black authors that I knew of, though later in life I learned that novels by Richard Wright became Book-of-the-Month Club selections. She made sure that everyone in the family got a book to call their own, from the library and from the book club. Library books were returned on time, but Book-of-the-Month Club books stayed at home in oak bookcases that my mother had made especially for us by a carpenter she hired, books that remain in service to our family to this very day.

Everyone in the family had their own bookcase, their own library, their own reading space, reading material, and reading style.

My father read sitting straight up in chairs, and his reading material was stashed in the combination bookshelf/headboard attached to their double-sized bed. He read *The Newark Star-Ledger* at 5:30 a.m. every morning, sitting straight up in a kitchen chair with a cup of black coffee in his hand. He devoured *Jet* magazine and the *New Jersey Afro-American* newspaper sitting straight up in a dining room chair, and he read *Fatherhood* by Bill Cosby, a book I bought for him much later on.

My mother read in the sun on the beach, or in a lounge chair in the back yard while getting a tan. *Dear and Glorious Physician* by Taylor Caldwell was one of her favorites.

My sister and I read in bunk beds, all balled up with intensity. She read *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* several times. Actually she read the book *sooo many* times that it became a family joke. I think she wrote the same ... *Tree Grows in Brooklyn* book report for several years running in school.

But in her adult years, my sister began to read and write poetry, and one of those poems addressed our sisterhood and the topic of reading, a poem she inscribed inside a birthday book gift to me, *In Search of Color Everywhere: A Collection of African-American Poetry* edited by E. Ethelbert Miller of Howard University.

During our youth
Of bunk bed brawls
When your space was filled with classics
Unknown to my tom-boyish mind
And my side
Consumed with *Archie* comics, baseball bats,
Much to your disgust and disappointment.
The silence, distance
Has somewhat diminished
As our youth willingly absorbs the dust.
We're devoted to the works and arts
Of our people
Of those that came before us.
They have connected us
At Last ...

Love ya, Ivy

January 20, 1996

It's true. While she read *Archie*, I read *Angel Unaware* by Roy Rogers and Dale Evans about their daughter Robin who died at a young age. I read any story that became a movie starring Shirley Temple. I read *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* and knew all the words to the songs in the movie!

This reading habit trickled down through the ages. Even though only one of my three young grandchildren attends school, they each have their own bookcase to hold personal treasures. *A Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats. *Cornrows* by Camille Yarbrough. Half of their "stock" consists of legacy books that came out of those same oak wood cases on Chadwick Avenue. And, their parents, my daughter and son-in-law, have their own books -- *Your Best Life Now*. *DaVinci Code* -- piled high and deep on living room shelves. *Rich in grace*.

Being an avid reader has followed me all the days of my life. When we left the projects and moved into that house on Chadwick, there was a huge box of books left in the basement by Yetta Stein and family, former owners. It was my first time seeing anything written by Hemingway. I was in book heaven. There were piles of books, among them *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *A Farewell to Arms*. The paperbacks were stamped 35 and 50 cents, and had colorful covers showing voluptuous painted women lounging in the arms of men, women with breasts that pulsed out of white blouses. I was 12 years old. I had never seen anything like that before. I read all the books in those boxes, and still have most of them today in my personal library, even though the exotic covers have long since crumbled and fallen off.

In my Weequahic High School years, I became a frequent customer of *The Paper Back Book Stall* at 575 Broad Street and Central Avenue in Newark, near where Top Shelf Gift Shop and Subway Restaurant stand today. I spent a considerable portion of my \$7.00 a week allowance at the Book Stall, mostly on miniature pocketbooks about the art of Jackson Pollack, books I still have in my personal library.

In to my adulthood, I became the person with more library cards in my wallet than credit cards. I moved to Harlem to live and obtained a card from the Countee Cullen Branch on 136th Street. I acquired a special research card from The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. I moved around a lot, down south for 12 years, but the first thing I always did, after transferring my voting registration and getting a voting card, was to sign up for a library card. I was Savannah State College library card number SC 528, and I still have a public library card from the Franklin Avenue Branch, Richmond, Virginia.

Back east, NPL membership was more than a reading experience. It was a rich community experience, as many Newarkers of a certain age can attest. There was always something going on at the library.

Urban Voices was a grassroots literary organization, led by the late, great James "Library" Brown. *Urban Voices* gave poetry readings on the 4th floor auditorium of the library, and 200 people regularly showed up to hear them.

James Brown also inaugurated The Lorraine Hansberry Lecture Series. I can recall one evening I, and members of the now defunct Newark Writers Collective Inc., sat in the first row of seats at a *Series* event, and listened to a whiskey-voiced writer read from her debut novel, a novel she wrote while a member of Harlem Writers Guild. The book was *Mama*. The reader, Terry McMillan. I received quite an education going to programs offered by *The ...Lecture Series*. McMillan's *Mama* was first of the sister-girl, *chick lit* novels that dominated the 1990s, clear into the 21st century.

Newark Writers Collective, in their 1970s-1980s heyday, invited Poet Laureate Gwendolyn Brooks (*Maud Martha*) to NPL's 4th floor stage, and it was standing room only. In those days, the 1960s-1980s, you could barely get a seat at any cultural or intellectual soirées in Newark. I am not even going into the spectrum of events offered by Newark Museum, from Alvin Ailey dancers to art from Tibet. In addition to the museum, there was the *new* Duke Ellington band that played at Essex County College. Novelist Gloria Naylor read her latest at Rutgers University to the jazz flute of Mr. Haven Clayborne who played all over the world including Japan but who lived in my neighborhood on Weequahic Avenue. There were history study groups, Jazz Vespers at United West Presbyterian Church on South Orange and Sixth, all-night parties in Amiri Baraka's basement, and Langston Hughes' *Black Nativity* at Theatre at Universal Images (T.U.I.) on Broad Street. I remember an Afro-centric lecture series, similar to First World Alliance in New York, at St. Matthew's United Methodist Church, 283 South Orange Avenue where we held Kwanzaa and Sister Katunge Mimy baked her incomparable squash quiche. We were fortunate to have the famous jazz corner on William Street with Sparky's on one side and The Key Club on the other; and legendary rhythm and blues that rang out just over the line, in Orange, at The Peppermint Lounge. There were political conversations at The Bridge Club, revolutionary plays and poetry at The Spirit House on Jones Street and at 502 High Street, and people were writing all over the place, publishing mimeographed chapbooks, if need be,

and all those drummers and dancers, artists and photographers and writers down at the Newark Public Library. That was the way Newark was, the way my life was. Everybody had a book in their hand, including me. So, it was a natural progression, I suppose, that I would inaugurate a reading group, a book club, aka a literary society; I, child of NPL, and graduate of the North End Branch summer youth reading club.

It was 1987. We read *Assata* by Assata Shakur. We read *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. Anybody and everybody came to discuss books. Zayid Mohammad was an early member. He is now Cultural Minister of The New Black Panther Party ... teaching poetry writing for 7 years straight at Afrikan Poetry Theatre in Queens, New York. Celeste Bateman was also an early member; cultural pied piper for the City of Newark, inaugurator of the long-standing *Sing in Praise of King*, and now head of her own business, Celeste Bateman Associates. The literary society lasted only one semester in the living room of my home at 395 Chadwick Avenue because the visionary James Brown suggested I write a proposal that would make us a funded part of NPL. I did that, and the Frances E.W. Harper Literary Society has been in residence at NPL ever since. The group now meets in the James Brown African American Room under the directorship of Dorothea M. Moore.

My life has gotten a lot busier since those simple days on Summer Avenue, reading books on that grassy slope. Yet, no matter what else I have to do, every Monday when I leave my University Heights-Newark neighborhood to come to work in my capacity as a Volunteer Researcher/Archivist in The Charles F. Cummings New Jersey Information Center at NPL, I use my library card to borrow something contemporary like *Baby Brother's Blues* by Pearl Cleage. Then, I catch up on my periodical reading by borrowing a couple of *American Legacy* magazines, in addition to an arresting DVD like Hitchcock's *Rear Window* or some sitcom silliness like *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, just for laughs.

At home, via subscription, I read, faithfully, *The New York Amsterdam News*, every single week. I picked up a classic today from Dana Library -- *Negro Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* edited in 1938 by St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton -- the kind of nonfiction I usually gravitate towards. Still, I do not read enough. When bell hooks (*Remembering Rapture*) decided she was going to be an intellectual, she set a goal for herself; to read one book every single day. That is my ambition. A tall order. During semester breaks, I line up the books I could not get to when I was swamped with exams and research papers to read and grade. This past spring break I rocked in the arms of *The Black Rose: Biography of Madame C.J. Walker* by Tananarive Due; *Black White and Jewish: An Autobiography of a Shifting Self* by Rebecca Walker ; and, *1996* by Gloria Naylor. Good reading.

The saga continues.

Sandra L. West Newark, NJ * July 2006

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Rich in Grace, memoir of a Newark bibliophile, could not have been written without the assistance of NPL's finest. That said, mad gratitude goes out to Lola Caldwell, The Director's Office; George Hawley, Charles F. Cummings New Jersey Information Center; NPL Reference Department On-Line; and Mary Teasley, James Brown African American Room, for graciously answering a million questions and helping to check facts. I also thank Barbara Kukla, retired *Star-Ledger* columnist and fellow writer, for remembering the name of that church. *I thank you all.*